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## **Behind political ideas of welfare and productivity – Exploring ontological models and forms of exclusion**

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### **Introduction**

In recent years, European societies have faced challenges related to the aftermaths of the global financial crisis and conflicts in neighbouring regions with devastating consequences for the civil populations in those areas. Without neglecting the complex causes of these events, the challenges appear in the shape of e.g. unemployment, poverty, inequalities in the distribution of wealth, welfare, and security across the European continent, and thus various forms of social suffering. In the encounter with these challenges, ideas of welfare and solidarity seem to become contested. At stake are ideals of inclusion, social justice, and in the end democratic solidarity hitherto fundamental in the development of European welfare states (Brunkhorst 2005). How those challenges are approached politically and by the populations within Europe will be crucial for social cohesion and the welfare and life conditions of individuals.

The aim of this article is to promote reflection on how political ideas of society, welfare and social work are informed by knowledge about the ontology of human beings and social problems and, how forms of exclusion are embedded in political ideas of welfare. The intention is to highlight the way in which various elements of the problem complex of man become visible at different times over the course of history.

In various ways, the historical movements in the view of human nature make out the conditions of the welfare policies and the framework for social work in Denmark, and in advanced welfare states today. The development has manifested in shifts: From political ideals of the ‘natural’ enhancement of the strong people, to ideals of rational planning, regulation, and protection of the populace, and later ideas of liberation of a population that has the inherent ability to achieve self-realisation in society. With a focus on the historical development in ontological models, it thus becomes clear that continuous objectives to ensure economic growth and the ‘productive standard’ in the populace exist throughout the historical material development of the Danish welfare state, but the development has also had a historical subtext of shifts in the ontological models, i.e. understandings, explanations, and definitions of human conditions and problems, their causes, solutions, and transformation processes. The shifting ontological models become greatly influential concerning the role and

responsibility of the state, the design of welfare policies, the technological solutions, and consequently the role and function of social work. This argument is explored and illustrated through a historical analysis with point of departure in the Danish context focusing on:

1. How political ideas of welfare historically relate to ideas of productivity as an unyielding focus on enabling inclusion on the labour market for the purpose of ensuring prosperity/economic growth and possibilities for welfare in an increasingly globalised competitive market
2. How continuous objectives to ensure economic growth and the ‘productive standard’ have had a historical subtext of shifts in the ontological models, i.e. understandings, explanations, and definitions of human conditions and problems, their causes, solutions, and transformation processes, and how forms of exclusion are related to these forms of knowledge
3. How science and social work can contribute to the reconstruction of broader and more nuanced views on human conditions, exclusion, and ultimately social problems.

## **1 Theoretical framing Political ideas of welfare - exploring ontological models and forms of exclusion**

In the following we will briefly outline how the relation between *political ideas of welfare*, *knowledge*, *exclusion* and *ontological models* can be theoretically understood and in particular how such models are underpinned by certain forms of knowledge.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, society can be perceived as a social space maintained by structures pertaining to class as well as to political ideas and values, which in the shape of knowledge and in the constitution of fields contribute to the reproduction of social differentiation (Bourdieu 2002). Thus inherent in political ideas of welfare is also the tranquilization of conflict through power, violence and domination. This means that inequality and forms of exclusion are less likely to be noticed when distributed and viewed through the symbolic values of and struggles for recognition within a field. This tranquilization is also what transforms structural inequalities into individualized forms of suffering (Bourdieu 2002). However, within this perception of society there are also potentials for reflection and critically questioning the logic of the field as well as the prevailing conceptions of what is considered truth.

Michel Foucault relates to this notion when suggesting that it was especially interesting to examine how Western European societies have historically marginalized “the other”, which was feared, in order to define the boundaries of what was “normal”. Later in his work he shows how a certain governmentality is related to forms of knowledge emerging in time and how such forms of knowledge and modes of governing are expressed in discourses shaping the institutional arrangements of society (Foucault 2000, Agamben 1998). Foucault pays attention to how the emergence and distribution of knowledge contributes to social categorizations and problematizations, and to the production of subjects as objects of change, but Foucault avoids an explicit analysis of causal processes, including the impact of social structures (Parr 2009, p. 370).

Critical realistic perspectives suggest ways to integrate the social constructionist view on social problems, with ontologically focused questions (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998, Ringø 2013, Ringø 2016). The analytical use of ontological models goes behind the welfare political

discursive phrasings in order to identify and explore the ideas of causal mechanisms and the contexts that have historically been dominant and instrumental in the political phrasings. Thus, in continuation of the realistic focus, the focus of the article is at the *mechanisms* that have historically assigned meaning to and explained deviations and social problems (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998, p.5, Brante 2014, Ringø 2013, 2016). We therefore make use of the way the realistic philosophy and science shift the focus from *occurrences* to *mechanisms*, directing our attention to how the causes of deviant (unproductive) behaviour and social problems are constructed historically, and have been used in different welfare political efforts and structurings of the content and function of social work. Ontological models represent a view on how to understand and explain humans, and in this context specifically the social problems and vulnerabilities of humans, through shifting forms of knowledge. On a scientific theoretical level, the application of ontological models expresses a distinction between perspectives of depths and surfaces in research and in the relationship between what is referred to as ontology and epistemology (Ringø 2016). In this context, this means that the ontological models focus our attentions on the reality that is seen as consisting of separate domains, with one domain (referred to as depth-ontological in the following) made up of the complex generative mechanisms (biological, neurological, social, societal, structural, material, communicative, psychological, etc.), which generate occurrences (eg. social problems) in a complex interaction. In other words, an analytical focus on ontological models suggests that there are generative mechanisms that enable or produce occurrences (eg. social problems), and that our knowledge of these mechanisms will always be mediated terminologically. As such, theory formation, terminological development, and analytical deconstruction as well as reconstruction are central elements. If we limit ourselves to what can be observed directly, we will end up letting the most superficial (measurable) aspects of social life and society determine the course in knowledge, management technologies, ambitions, and visions of quality in the welfare state. Society, individual, and ‘social problems’ are in many ways abstract representations of interactive mechanisms that we cannot observe directly, but must instead seek to approach and understand by continuously developing theories, models, and concepts. In the following, we will identify the historical development in ontological models, including generative mechanisms that have historically defined social problems, deviance, and illness in an interaction between policies, knowledge, and technology (Ringø 2016). Niklas Luhmann suggests modern political ideas of welfare can be viewed as a reflection on forms of inclusion and exclusion in relation to knowledge (Luhmann 1990, 1996). Thus political ideas of welfare as well as the concrete social responsibility for welfare become dependent on solidarity, and solidarity becomes dependent on the knowledge about the mechanisms that generate or produce social problems. If so, advanced critical reflection on political ideas of welfare, and the forms of inclusion/exclusion different forms of knowledge produce, is crucial for understanding and facing social challenges of contemporary European societies.

## **2 Construction of data and data analysis**

The empirical sources for this exploration derive from an ongoing extensive research project: *Views on human being in social work*<sup>1</sup> The project explores how views on human beings have developed in social work in Denmark in particular in an interplay with welfare policies, technologies and forms of knowledge about human beings. This article is based on the analysis of the historical formation of political ideas of welfare in Denmark. The empirical

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<sup>1</sup> [www.menneskesyn.aau.dk](http://www.menneskesyn.aau.dk)

sources are textual sources expressing shifting political ideas of welfare emerging in the constitution and formation of the welfare state in general, and in social policy in particular, e.g. political programmes, policy papers, and commission reports often considered important in scholarly literature. Further, to include texts that more directly exemplify ideas from science and professions, the analysis draws on textual sources from *Socialrådgiveren* - the professional journal of social workers first published in 1938, and from other sources expressing scientific and professional views and advocacy for changes in policy and legislation.

All documents were read and analyzed with a focus on the implicit and explicit understandings, explanations, and forms of knowledge about human beings. In combination, the analyses of the historical material form a nuanced image of how *the ontology of human beings* is shaped by forms of knowledge that have gained legitimacy in a certain time, representing certain understandings and explanations of ‘unproductivity’ (social problems, societal problems, illnesses, and diseases). In the following we unfold our analysis in a chronological perspective, starting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and moving up to today. Our intention is not to make a grand history of social work, but to demonstrate some of the most significant ontological models and the shifts that have taken place.

### **3 The biological standard and the welfare of the working man – the problem of the “moron”**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a widespread understanding and explanation of the life and development of human beings was based on genetics and biological theory of inheritance (Wimmer 1909). Such biological explanations had a resonance in various fields of practices e.g. statistics, medicine, biology, psychiatry, and social hygiene. Those individuals believed to be, in the vernacular of the time, “insane”, “retarded” or physically defective, or who had genetic ailments, were perceived as incurably due to largely inherent biological dispositions (Steincke 1912, Kemp 1951). Thus the expectations of the ability, will and opportunity of those individuals to improve were extremely limited. One could say that *the ontological model of the time referred to biological generative mechanisms within a mono causal model*.

In Denmark, this ontological model became entangled in the political idea of promoting a strong, healthy, and productive populace. This model underlined early writings expressed by the significant Danish Socialdemocrat K. K. Steincke in 1912, who was later to become the minister of justice (1924-26) and social affairs (1929-1935) and thereby an important promoter of social reforms (1933) and the Commission of Population (1935) setting a path for the ‘universalization’ of welfare and social rights for the population in general. This early shaping of the Danish welfare state was concerned with *the welfare of the working man*. It has been noted that a precondition to an expansion in general welfare was a reduction in the costs of internment of the physical and mentally impaired by identifying those who could live and work outside the institution (Koch 1996). However, this constituted in tandem a problem of the presence of the “moron” in society and on the labour market potentially endangering the biological quality of the population.

The ontological model behind those early ideas of productivity and how to deal with those considered unproductive was biological, focusing on the physical and mental capacity to work in a capitalist and competitive society. As Steincke later expressed in his reflections on the

treatment of the “ill, weak, and abnormal” in *Fremtidens forsørgelsesvæsen*<sup>2</sup> (1920) a precondition to allowing the “moron” to live and work in society was biological precautions:

“Everyone alive, *every* human being should be entitled to the happiest life possible, and should, if necessary, be protected and cared for. Only in one respect, society must man its post: where *reproduction* is concerned. Once a human being burdened with hereditary issues has been born, he must have the right to live and rejoice in life to the best of his abilities and insofar as the concern for his fellow man’s wellbeing allows it, but one right he must lose, one option must be taken from him, namely that of transferring his faults to his descendants and thus perpetuating and multiplying the misfortune. This double thought constitutes a union between the selective law of nature which rules in nature, and the moral law of compassion: We treat the wretch with all the care and love we have, but just refuse him the right to reproduce in return (Steincke 1920)

Just like a regular working man, the “wretch” should have an equal chance of and the right to “the happiest life possible”, but was obliged to renounce the right “to reproduce”. As such the social policies of the 1920s represented a drastic strengthening of the state power based in population control. Eugenics precautions and the sterilization laws of the late 20’s and early 30’s can be interpreted as extreme manifestations of this paradigm of order (Koch 1996) and of *an ontological model based on biological deterministic knowledge excluding certain human beings from reproduction* (Kemp 1951, Bauman 1992). At the same time, the political idea of the welfare of the productive working human being gave rise to social reforms and social rights, as well as an early universalisation of welfare service aiming at promoting motherhood and thus *the reproduction of healthy productive human beings*. In the late 1930s, this was expressed in laws on pregnancy and helping mothers, laws which helped enable the emergence of professional and educated social work in Denmark (Nissen 2017).

#### **4 Building up welfare and the productive standard – psychology, ecology and social science**

As it is well known, World War II placed the monocausal ontological model of biological generative mechanisms in a highly contested position. However, the expectation that the welfare of the population could be improved through the rational building and expansion of expert systems and professional expertise did not disappear. During the post war era, Denmark, along with the other Nordic countries, experienced an increase in export on a gradually more open and international market. This created a demand for a bigger and more efficient work force, now also including more women Labour market reforms and the expansion of welfare services was significant of this period based on ideas of efficiency, solidarity and equality (Kautto et al, 2002).

Political ideas of the time embraced forms of knowledge which had already emerged during the war and the post-war era, promoted by *psychology/psychiatry*, *human ecology*, and *social science* respectively. One should not underestimate this strong integration of science, professionalization and state intervention. *First* inspirations from psychology/psychiatry made it possible to consider individual experiences vastly important as generative mechanisms in the understanding of human problems and potential psychopathological behaviours (Ringø 2013). Already during and in the years following World War II, Danish social workers were

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<sup>2</sup> In English, this means something akin to “The Dependency System of the Future”.

strongly inspired by case-work approaches of American social workers. In particular the strong psychoanalytical leanings of the New York School of Social Work seemed to have an impact. It was argued that Danish social workers should achieve thorough knowledge of individual human behaviour and the causes behind (von Sivers 1947, Fårup & Heinild 1953, Andersen 1966). The psychological and psychoanalytical elements of the human existence was prominent at this time, though, as formulated in the social workers' magazine in 1953:

”[The] low standard of living keeps the recipients of social benefits on a bare minimum of sustenance, and the charity principle is ever present, which causes humiliation and leads to an escape into illness, because it undermines the self-respect of the individual. Vulnerability, crime, alcoholism, etc. are all natural reactions to psychological pressure (Fårup & Heinild 1953, p.49-50).

*Secondly*, inspirations from human ecological views on the interaction between human beings and their social environment made it possible to include how the development of individuals and groups relates to changes in the environment and in the broadest sense society. The changing society, the social environment, the way this had an impact on human life conditions, on the family, marital relations etc. were aspects included as conditions and causes to either well-being or “strains” and “psychological pressure”:

”In spite of the technological and material benefits, the development of modern societies has been detrimental to other human needs. The need to belong to a community of solidarity is presumably as fundamentally important to a human being as sufficiently access to food and clothing. Modern society has divided and dissolved groups based on geography, kin and other things that make up a society [...] Particularly outside of the distinctly working class neighborhoods, people do not know who they are living next door to. Division has pervaded even the closest family groups ...” (Hoffmeyer 1954, p. 29)

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, these psychological/psychiatric and relationel explanations were gradually extended and politicized, and at that time, the journal *Socialrådgiveren* shows several attempts to establish a bridge between psychoanalysis and the historical materialism. Especially the Marxist understanding, in which the emergence of man and of personality in the relevant societal structure exists in a mutual interaction between inherent biological structures and societal structures and productive forces in the capitalist society, is voiced alongside the psychoanalytical approaches (Højer-Pedersen 1963).

Behind these political ideas of welfare was a complex ontological model viewing human beings as individuals in a society of social conditions, forces and mechanisms influencing the social, material and psychological quality of life eventually causing social problems.

The whole concept of ”drawing” a community profile gains new and extended meaning if we relate it to the interest in uncovering societal conditions and factors that create clients, or that keep people locked in a client position (5). Behind this interest lies a reflection on social issues that is in opposition to symptom management on an individual basis and that instead attempts to document, influence, and prevent environmental and societal conditions that are the true causes of the individual problems [...]. The causes should be the target. This creates a displacement of who is the client. In a more traditional view, the product is seen as the client. However, if we choose a

treatment aimed at the actual causes, the environment and society become the client (Hermansen, 1972, p.211).

*The ontological models of welfare policies were thus expanded to include generative mechanisms in the form of social, structural, material, and contextual explanations of the problems of man.* In other words, there was an emergence of the contours of a man, determined by a range of mechanisms which he himself could not control; the structures, conditions, environment, living conditions, and economic fluctuations around him, as well as by the pressure to adapt and be productive that derives from the industrial mass production in a modern technological society.

*Thirdly* an inspiration from social science characterized by a behaviouristic-positivistic methodology was at play. This was a 'science of society' utilizing quantitative methods to uncover the regularities of social life, or arrive at its average, aspiring to the same models of explanation used in the natural sciences: explain, categorise, control, and improve (Haney 2008, Klausner & Lidz 1986, Lazarsfeld & Reitz 1975). At this time, various ideals of emancipation were at play, including ideals of emancipation through a deeper understanding of the significance of collective processes in the development of welfare and social issues, as well as ideals of emancipation through extensive regulation and control. In the 1970's, the latter led to an extensive criticism of the oppressive side effects of the expert systems. At the same time, the latter ideals of emancipation were based on the notion that social science could produce knowledge about social problems, and in continuation of this that social work as a professional expertise could solve social problems in an effective way provided by expert systems as well as ideas of rational planning, 'social engineering', and 'social administration' (Howe 1996, Parton 1996, Wagner 1994). In the beginning of the 1960's, this condition was considered inevitable and gave rise to the emergence of universal, professionalized, and specialized welfare services. The political idea of welfare was expressed in the Social Democratic program *Vejen Frem*<sup>3</sup> (1961). The purpose of social policy was to prevent social misfortunes, to help people struck by social problems, e.g. unemployment, illness, and disability, to improve their lives, but was also considered as an important element in ensuring welfare for the purpose of increasing productivity:

"Social policies can contribute to improving health, fill out people's lives, and keep up people's zest for life. This is valuable in and of itself. However, social policies also contribute to our work capacity and increasing our resilience to the pressure put on us by an ever-changing existence. Social policies make the individual citizen better equipped to take on new productive tasks. In short: Modern social policies contribute to an enhancement of the productive standard of the population. Exactly the same way as when we invest in health services and education. An investment in social policies is a productive investment" (The programme of the Social Democrats, 1961).

From the beginning of the 1960's an expansive social policy was developed. The reduction of inequality through state intervention became an object of increasing attention. In continuation of this the welfare policies of the 1960's and 1970's truly made the universal rights of citizens a central notion in Denmark. In order to create more equal living conditions between citizens, job market policies, housing policies, and other types of social policies were developed (Andersen 1966, Swärd et al. 2013). Thus the policies of the 1960's exhibited a similar

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<sup>3</sup> Translates to "The Road Forward".



optimism as in other European countries and a belief in that societal and social challenges related to the well-being of the population could be faced through rational political planning and an extensive welfare state based on knowledge and professional expertise (Philp 1979, Wagner 1994). The aim was to create the good, equal, and just society with fewer socially and psychologically impaired people (Maxwell 1971). Several experts have pointed out how the 1960's were synonymous with the emergence of social rights and extensive policies of redistribution, and how an interventionist welfare state emerged, supported by a trust in the ability of scientists and experts to deal with problems. What we may add to this point is that behind those political ideas of welfare emerging in the beginning of the 1960's was a complex reservoir of knowledge based on knowledge about the context and life conditions of the individual and an interest in developing explanatory models for explaining individual and social problems, as well as showing how productivity and unproductivity could be perceived and solved. What is interesting is that the political programs partly seek to protect the population against the consequences and competitiveness of industrialization, while economic growth and productivity retain a position as an important political goal. The means to the end was the application of a more depth-ontological knowledge about the individual, which is in part of Marxist methodological origin. At the same time, in opposition to this, this knowledge is utilized in a wider capitalist context as a basis for ensuring the productive standard of the population.

## **5 Streamlining the welfare state – individualization, responsabilization and activation of the productive citizen**

In the 1970's the expanding Danish welfare state came under pressure. The economic and global oil crises dimmed the previous optimism of the 1960's. The economic crisis and global oil crises were combined with a liberalist criticism skeptical of the paternalistic and solicitous social work and welfare state in general and in Denmark expressed in the landslide election in 1973 (Ploug et. al. 2004). The collective community were seen as a hindrance for individual opportunities, and there was a focus on the passivising and institutionalising side effects of the universal welfare model. Critics called attention to institutionalisation, mass production, and bureaucratic organisations with central (state) control as side effects of the policies of that time. Social workers participated actively in that critique pointing at the differentiation of and increase in administration hindering a holistic and adequate approach to the individual client. The comprehensive studies of Socialreformkommissionen<sup>4</sup> initiated in 1965 and finished in 1972 represented "an investigation into the possibility of simplifying and streamlining the social administration – without impairing the options for social help and the social safeguarding in general", it was said (Andersen 1970, p.12, Socialreformkommissionen 1972). The studies were conducted by the National centre for social research. It was concluded that the social welfare system only to a limited extent complied with social political goals concerning early, sufficient, holistic and individualized help to citizens, and that this was mainly due to structural and organisational conditions of the welfare system itself. It was suggested that the welfare system was reformed in order to make it more unified, decentralized and individualised for the purpose of targeting welfare services to local and individual needs of citizens. This critique of lack of efficiency raised by the social reform studies became a recurring theme during the 1970's and later in the 1980's. It gave rise to the *Act on social security of 1976*, where the assessment of the right to social assistance formerly based on an objective situation of needs was decentralized to local authorities and

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<sup>4</sup> In English: The Social Reform Commission.

professional discretion. Some social workers welcomed this based on emerging ideas of ‘user involvement’ and the possibility to shape social policy and intervention locally. The frame of reference for this form of criticism was in part new ideals of empowerment and freedom of the individual client (Hermansen 1972). Others criticised this development for being fatal; the decentralization of responsibility would open for differential services followed by a general dissatisfaction and lack of support for the welfare state, it was argued (Reintoft 1976: 108-109).

The social criticism based on uncovering the complexity, depth, realities, and constituent qualities of society, were displaced towards the end of the 1970’s, in favour of new scientific and post-modernistic disciplines in the universities. Thus, in the years 1970/1980 and forth the social policies started producing individualised services in compliance with the needs for less state intervention. The prevailing knowledge in the ontological models were no longer concerned with discovering societal, contextual, biological or psychological regularities and mechanisms which govern what people say and do. Instead the surface of people’s behavior came into focus through psychological and individualized knowledge pointing towards behavioural regulation (Ringø 2013). New social movements and new notions of justice arose, which no longer took part in the struggle over social justice, solidarity and the distribution of material resources in society in quite the same way as before. These new movements thus sow the seeds for new forms of understandings, views on human nature and social problems, which became prominent and important in the years to follow. The notions of justice in these new movements were less based on an understanding of rights, but more on immaterial opportunities for self-realisation as well as the individual’s resources and capacity for change and improvement (Willig 2013, p. 49, Honneth & Fraser 2003). There was a shift in perspectives . With this also came new responsibilities for the individual, as well as for social work.

What was less noticed was that this decentralization of responsibility also enabled political ideas of welfare to become detached from, and therefore also less dependent on, generative mechanisms and depth-ontological forms of knowledge about human beings, society, and social problems. The new welfare ideals of the competitive society rest on new post-ontological models; new forms of knowledge about the relation between society and human beings, and a neglect of the mechanisms that generate social problems gained traction. Macro-political ideas of welfare could from then on focus on the governance of the welfare state based on generalized ideas of the good life of the productive individual as the reason for and purpose of welfare and not on the causes for social problems. This enabled new forms of governance and responsabilization of local authorities. From then on political ideas of welfare became ideas about governing welfare, entailing a stronger focus on the management of the welfare state (Foucault 2000, Agamben 1998) The modernisation programmes of the 1980’s in Denmark promoted by the Conservative liberal government became central to this development. By decentralizing economic responsibility, competences and forms of knowledge related to welfare services, the intention was to enable a “stronger political influence on the development of the public expenditures in total”, it was stated (Finansministeriet 1983). The argument was that ”It is necessary if the welfare society is to stand the test in the economic conditions of the 1980’s, and if we are to dispel the myths of the lack of dynamism in the public sector” (Finansministeriet 1983, p.2). In that sense the Modernisation programmes in the 1980’s set the path for an economic focus on the productivity of the welfare state opening up new forms of incentives. In the 1990’s those

possibilities became an integrated part of the Social Democratic led government's approach to welfare reforms and in particular social reforms.

Besides the general idea of the need for economic and structural conversion of the public sector and various experiments expressing forms of New public management, the revision of the Act of social security in 1993 followed by the social reform in 1997 including the *Act on active social policy* exemplified this (Nielsen 2009). The act on active social policy set a path for a responsabilization of the individual for becoming a productive human through "activation". The local authorities became obliged to activate all unemployed people receiving social benefits, including young persons with "other problems than unemployment". This initial formation of workfare approaches was at that time considered as a "forward looking" policy and an expression of a "positive view on human beings" based on a Social Democratic and Social Liberal belief that "people in this country want to be used" (Pedersen, Social Democrats, 1997: sp. 6073, 6075):

"One of the things we have emphasized from the start has been that prevention and individual involvement and commitment had to be the keywords. That was to be the aim of it all: Away from personal incapacitation, not formally of course, but in reality, the passivizing kind of guardianship, and away from passive public assistance that has no specialized and adapted challenges, which led to human degradation and hopelessness (Elmqvist, The Danish Social-Liberal Party, 1997: sp. 6089).

In that sense as a contrast to the criticism in the 1970's pointing at paternalism, the individual is now expected to be moving constantly towards new possible future developmental goals (Ringø in press, Nissen in press). Productivity or performativity becomes the dominant criterion for knowledge evaluation (Wagner 1994, Howe 1996, Lorenz 2006). This view on the unproductive man is currently enforced by ideas of the need for innovation and cost-effectiveness in welfare solutions. In relation to Luhmann (1990) this excludes those individuals who are not considered as actively seeking to become productive.

In the 2000's, the liberalist Conservative government created economic incentives for, and forms of control of local authorities working with unemployed people. Unemployed people were viewed as human beings with potentially flawed motives and lack of motivation to become active. Thus in that period sanctions towards unemployed people absent from mandatory activities became harsh and related to loss of benefits:

"'Quid pro quo' is about confronting the lack of consequence without killing the activists and without creating a system of selfishness (...) But today we live in a society where in many cases it doesn't matter whether a person is just barely getting by or whether they really strap in and create something great and innovative. That's why we must appreciate and reward those who make a difference. (...) "'Quid pro quo'" can also be a sanction aimed at those who show no regard for the rules of our community (...) For this reason, this programme is very much about how to reward those who are willing and able. At the same time, good examples can help us lead the way for those who are willing, but not able (...) (Regeringen 2004, p. 3)

## **6 The innovative and cost-effective human being**

As indicated already in the 2000's, the performance of the public sector and of individuals is presently strongly associated with ideas of innovation and cost-effectiveness. Political ideas

of welfare are closely tied to visions of Denmark's competitiveness on a global capitalist market as indicated by the Danish Commission of Productivity in 2014.

Productivity creates wealth and welfare. The higher the level of productivity, the more opportunities for the Danish people. The fact that in the course of half a century until the mid-1990's, Denmark became one of the wealthiest countries on the planet is due to a speedy development in Danish productivity. This development has plateaued. Since the mid-1990's, Denmark has been losing ground with a growth in productivity of less than one per cent a year. That is low compared to other western countries[...] The weak development in productivity means that Denmark has missed out on a series of opportunities. If nothing is done, Denmark will lose even more ground in the years to come, and our wealth and welfare will continue to degenerate compared to the countries to which we usually compare ourselves (Produktivitetskommissionen 2014, p.7).

In the report of the commission there is a demand for "new solutions and effectiveness", "innovation" among users and public employees, "competitive mechanisms", "best quality to the best price", "motivation", "distinct leadership", "rewarding employees" based on "competences, performance and wage", and an increased focus on "goals, prices and effects". In arguing for a comprehensive effort to raise productivity, the commission referred to the relation between the economic productivity and wealth of society and the improvement of quality and the volume of resources within the school and health care systems. Just as in the early formation of the Danish welfare state, ideas of universal welfare for the population in general combined with a strive for economic wealth are still at the centre of political conflicts, discussions and ideas about welfare. Today there is a strong focus on the individual's resources and capacity for present or future change and improvement (Fallov & Larsen 2017). Recently this has manifested in a strong focus on discovering the "resource profiles", measurements of functionality and potentials for "rehabilitation" of all 'unproductive' people under the mantra that the work and productivity of "ordinary people" should be rewarded - even though the reason for unemployment may be long term life threatening or chronic somatic or psychiatric diseases (Ringø in press). Therefore one can say that in particular the complex 'depth-ontological model' viewing human beings as individuals in a society of social conditions, forces, and mechanisms influencing the social, material, and psychological quality of life eventually *causing social problems* has been relatively excluded from the political conversation (Ringø 2013). What emerged in the late 1970's and gained traction during the 1980's and 1990's up to today was an ontological model detached from complex forms of knowledge about human beings to new very generalized ideas of development, change, and movement. The present focus is mainly related to knowledge about how human beings are capable of using hidden resources and potentials, being self-supportive and independent of social benefits, taking responsibility for their own rehabilitation, and being active in or moving closer to the labour market.

The 'depth-ontological model', with a focus on generative mechanisms, which previously contributed to the shaping of welfare programmes of the post-war era are presently easily deemed 'unproductive', old-fashioned and less 'innovative'.

## 7 Concluding remarks

In order to understand persistent forms of exclusion within the Danish and other European welfare states there is a need to promote reflection on, how political ideas of welfare are based on more or less complex forms of knowledge and thus may convey limited ontological

models of human beings, social problems and society. Through our historical analysis we have found that:

1. The Danish welfare state has historically been shaped around ideas of productivity and wealth related to economic forces. Shifting governments have continuously sought to improve the Danish productivity by ensuring the welfare of the working man, by improving the productive standard of the population, facilitating individualization, responsabilization and activation of productive potentials, and lately by enabling innovative cost-effective human beings for the purpose of enabling Denmark's strong position in a growing international, competitive global market.
2. Behind political ideas of the necessity of creating growth and enhancing performances and productivity, there is a subtext of shifting ontological models. A critical, realistic focus on ontological models and generative mechanisms illustrates how the historical shifts in knowledge have excluded deeper explanations and understandings of the mechanisms of illness or problem creation that exist in modern societies, including a focus on those mechanisms that transform structural inequalities into individualized forms of suffering (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998, Bourdieu 2002). Such models are shaped by prevailing forms of knowledge providing certain understandings and explanations of the generative mechanisms causing human conditions and social problems. From a mono-causal biological model in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to a more complex ontological model viewing human beings as individuals in a society of social conditions after WWII. The latter with a focus on the forces and mechanisms influencing the social, material and psychological quality of life eventually causing social problem. During the late 1970's, 1980's and the 1990s, this complex model was gradually excluded from political ideas of welfare. *Decentralization, individualization, responsabilization, activation and the promotion of innovation* within the public sector became new political strategies (Rose 1986, Rose 2007, Foucault 1982). This development signifies that political ideas of welfare have not in general, in fact only for a short period, been informed by complex ontological models offering psychological, social, societal and biological explanations that aims to understand the collective and societal mechanisms of exclusion that could explain *why* people may become 'unproductive'. And these models were to a large extent mixed with behaviouristic-positivistic methodology in an attempt to regulate and control the population, which led to the critics after the second world war. In general, political ideas of welfare have been shaped through economic visions, the strive for wealth, and by a move from understanding the collective causes of human conditions and social problems to a focus on treating and eliminating the symptoms in more efficient ways in social work.

Based on the extensive document studies presented in this article, the development in the view of human nature does not seem to be driven largely by ontologically fundamental knowledge of ill, vulnerable, and defenceless people. Rather, the recognition and validity of specific types of knowledge emerge through mutual interactions with specific economic, political, and management technological assumptions about how best to ensure a productive,

cost-effective, and competitive society, but also through shifting cultural- and moral assumptions and social values. Therefore, it follows that social work encounters significant challenges, and carries out an important function as an agent of change. Social work has this transformative role with respect to pointing out inadequate ontological models in the situations where the political tendencies are incongruent with the reality of the lifeworld of vulnerable people. Historically, the interaction between knowledge, politics, and technology has precluded different possible understandings of reality in its totality (Mills 1959).

A basic notion, as outlined in the theoretical and empirical reflections above, is the idea that political ideas of welfare should convey a complex understanding of how social problems are genuinely problems of a society, and as such cannot simply be distributed to the environment or explained as individual failure. Political ideas of welfare may also convey ways of distributing social conflicts, social inequalities, systemic barriers and negations into ideas of the good life and expectations on behalf of the individual, underpinned by forms of knowledge that constitutes certain truths about what a human being *is* or can become, and excludes others. In our view, a political reductionistic ontological model has at least two consequences. The first is a dismantling of fundamental discussions of what kind of knowledge should inform the development of welfare. The second is that when social policy is not based on complex ontological knowledge, it threatens the political, moral and cultural solidarity. We insist that it should be possible for contemporary advanced welfare states to make multi-disciplinary forms of knowledge about human life visible, and thus to promote ontological models that involve knowledge of generative mechanisms and the societal foundations of social problems. Such knowledge could contribute to a reflection on how the development of political, cultural, and moral solidarity is driven by openness and curiosity towards knowledge of the collective generative mechanisms, but also a cultural, moral, and value-based knowledge of stability, of scarce resources, and of the opposite of growth and productivity. Such knowledge could contribute to societal formations that have a larger methodological, human, social, and historical perspective.

This might furthermore involve the cultivation of forms of “sociological imagination” (Mills 1959) combining knowledge of society, social conditions, forces and mechanism with knowledge of the social, material, biological and psychological aspects of human life. This involves, moreover, the quite simple notion that reductionist views on human beings should always be questioned.

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